Inked: Human-Horse Apprenticeship, Tattoos, and Time in the Pazyryk World

Gala Argent
Eastern Kentucky University
gala@me.com

Abstract
Prior interpretations of the tattoos of nonhuman animals etched upon the preserved human bodies from the Pazyryk archaeological culture of Inner Asia have focused on solely human-generated meanings. This article utilizes an ethnoarchaeological approach to reassess these tattoos, by analogizing the nature and possibilities of human-ridden horse intersubjectivities in the present with those of the past. As enlightened by people who live with horses, including the author, the process of learning to ride can be seen as an interspecies apprenticeship process, where both humans and horses pass along social knowledge as thoughtful actors with defined roles. From this perspective, the horse tattoos are presented as polysemic materializations of the bonds between particular Pazyryk horses and people, of blended identities, and of cosmological values related to time, memory, and belonging. The article concludes that exploring smaller-scale human-nonhuman animal interactions in the present allows for fresh interpretations of similar interactions in the past and provides a means for archaeology to move beyond the objectification of animals as sets of resources or symbols.

Keywords
animal agency, social knowledge, identity, apprenticeship, meaning, riding horses, animals in archaeology, human-animal relationships, tattoos, Pazyryk, Iron Age

No one can teach riding so well as a horse.
—C. S. Lewis

We come to feel towards great horses like we feel towards great people; we wish they could live forever.
—George B. Hatley (Haddle, 1975, p. 12)

It is difficult to include “real” nonhuman animals in archaeological studies as anything other than objects, for the main reason that approaches which take nonhuman animal agency as a starting point are still rare in that discipline. Animals, themselves, are not seen as actors in dynamic cultural processes, because culture is conceived as a human-only endeavor, enacted upon animals without any perceived reciprocal meanings they might possibly contribute.
Furthermore, the conventional view is broad in scale, with animals considered at the species level; they are sets, not individuals. Archaeological studies approaching horses through this lens are interesting, valuable, and have added much to the understanding of the human use of horses in past societies (e.g., Anthony, 2007; Levine, Renfrew, & Boyle, 2003; Olsen, Grant, Choyke, & Bartosiewicz, 2006). However, this view is often at odds with the experiences of those who relate with actual equine individuals, myself included (e.g., Acton, 2010; Argent, 2012; Birke, Bryld, & Lykke, 2004; Brandt, 2004; Game, 2001; Sharpe, 2005).

As this special issue shows, there is interest in addressing animals in fresh ways in archaeological studies. Yet much archaeological research seems stymied by a lack of theory and methodology through which to approach animals as beings with agential qualities. This is further complicated by the over-emphasis in many social archaeologies (and the broader academy) on issues of power, hierarchy, and manipulation in human-animal interactions, where animals are exploited as parts of human economic strategies (e.g., Drews, 2004, pp. 74-80; Dietz, 2003; Ingold, 1994; Tuan, 1984). The unspoken assumption is that humans use; animals are used. This focus misses the fact that both humans and other social animals also engage cooperatively, empathically, and pro-socially with other beings (see Balcombe, 2009; Decety & Ickes, 2009; Keltner, Marsh, & Smith, 2010; Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005; Smuts, 2008; de Waal, 2009). These points combine to suggest that an approach which considers animals as “minded and self-aware participants in collective action with their human associates” (Sanders, 2007, p. 330)—and that such action can be mutually cooperative rather than unilaterally exploitive—might provide fresh interpretations of past communities which lived with animals.

I use such an approach here to reinterpret meanings of the horses tattooed upon the human bodies from the Pazyryk archaeological culture, a community that lived with, rode with, and buried their dead with horses some 2,500 years ago. To do this, rather than turn to the literature on meanings associated with tattoos, I instead explore how these people for whom horses were so crucial might have interacted with their horses. I begin with some questions: How does a human learn to ride a horse, and how does a horse learn to be ridden? What types of relationships can develop when humans interact with horses in this way? With these considerations in place, I explore how this type of embodied partnership might have been materialized in the Pazyryk horse tattoos, and what the tattoos might reveal about the place and impacts of horses embedded within this community’s conceptions of life and the afterlife.
Interspecies Apprenticeship in the Practice of Riding

Those who ride horses more than casually understand that the process is not unidirectional, with the rider demanding an action and the horse compliantly submitting. Rather, riding is a “joint action” (Sanders, 2007) between rider and horse, where both must move in synchrony together, anticipating and predicting the other’s actions in order to remain safe. For both it is a sharing of space, time, rhythms, and patterns through various relational modalities—physiological, phenomenological, psychological, and interpersonal (Argent, 2012; Evans & Franklin, 2009). Learning to move together harmoniously in these various ways takes many years of constant practice for both humans and horses. The method of social learning most often used for this is best described as “apprenticeship” (cf. Podhajsky, 1968/1997, p. 4). In this process, the nascent rider works with a more skilled rider (or trainer)—who at one point was a nascent rider who worked with a more skilled rider to learn the embodied, primarily nonverbal, “language” shared with horses (Argent, 2012; Birke et al., 2004; Brandt, 2004; Game, 2001).

However, it is not only within the human that this knowledge resides. There is an axiom in the horse world: “Green horse, seasoned rider; green rider, seasoned horse” (cf. Dorrance & Desmond, 1999, p. 16). This means that an unschooled horse should be brought to the process of riding by an experienced human who can do so effectively, without causing either physical or psychological damage to the horse. Conversely, a new rider is usually “taught the ropes” by a patient, honest, usually older, horse. Across Euro-American equestrian disciplines today, these horses are termed “schoolmasters” or “school horses.” These veteran riding horses “fill in for a person who lacks experience” (Dorrance & Desmond, 1999, p. 16).

Schoolmasters both teach their students and keep them safe. Because horses are all individuals, each brings unique techniques to this work. As noted about one schoolmaster, “She would never spook or buck, although she would play tricks on beginner riders, such as walking around in circles, refusing to trot, or walking back to the mounting block and stopping!” (Sanger, 2010, p. 1). The message from the horse in this instance is clear: “I know how this is supposed to go, and you’re not getting it right. Once you figure it out, we’ll do it your way. In the meantime, I’ll keep letting you know you’re not there yet in ways that will challenge you but not hurt you.”

Horses are predisposed to be caring teachers. They understand the concepts of belonging and watching out for each other, and they can bestow such concern on humans, choosing to bond deeply with particular people (Argent, 2010, 2012; van Dierendonck & Goodwin, 2006; Sigurjónsdóttir,
Dierendock, & Thórhallsdóttir, 2002). In the wild, the equine father, mothers, and elder siblings contribute to teaching foals social skills and norms of appropriate behavior within a sophisticated care system which includes complex, contextual roles (Boyd & Keiper, 2005, pp. 55-56; Fey, 2005, p. 83; Morris, 1988, p. 49). In a similar fashion, schoolmasters tend their human charges and teach them not only the physical aspects of riding—how to balance, turn, stop, and go—but also the shared social norms necessary for members of the two species to get along. Still, not all horses can, or decide to, act out the role of schoolmaster. As sociologist Acton (2010) noted of her time learning foxhunting from a schoolmaster, termed a “made hunter” within that subculture, “only a certain type of horse can take on the onerous responsibility of an untutored human” (p. 82). Good schoolmasters have the knowledge, the constitution, and—important to an understanding of equine agency in this process—the willingness to care for and teach humans. They must choose to take on this role.

Recognizing schoolmasters as the special and patient teachers they are demonstrates that riding is not a linear, one-sided phenomenon in which humans solely act upon horses. Instead it is a co-constructed, contextual web of interchanges and understandings in which thoughtful human and horse beings act out complex, mutually understood meanings about individuals, actions, roles, and norms through caring and interdependent dealings with each other. It is not only the human who creates and replicates this shared culture. Through the process of apprenticeship, riding culture is passed along not (only) from human teachers to students but also in an unending chain from horse to rider to horse to rider, with one (horse or human) teaching the other (horse or human).

This is not to say that all human cultures, subcultures, or individuals engage with horses through the type of relationship I have described or that issues of power, domination, and disagreement are always absent. Horses have been and still are misunderstood, exploited, and abused. Instead I argue that the potentials of the human-horse relationship I have elucidated transcend those commonly permissible in many academic constructs. A crucial point to this discussion is that horses treated violently may react in kind (McGreevy & McLean, 2005, p. 203) and certainly will not learn to be good teachers (Podhajsky, 1968/1997, p. 12). When schooled and treated respectfully, horses will use their minds, bodies, and agency to look out for their riders “with willing cooperation and an absolute devotion” (Podhajsky, 1968/1997, p. 3), and this cannot be forced, bullied, or imposed. Therefore, there is a built-in motivator to approach horses cooperatively, because doing so perpetuates a culture of mutual interspecific care.
It would be dangerous and illogical for humans not to avail themselves of these benevolent equine actors to teach them to ride, and cross-cultural references suggest that the concern horses can bestow upon humans in this way transcends cultural distinctions (e.g., Acton, 2010; Cohen, 1998, p. 24; Ewers, 1955, p. 66; Podhajsky, 1968/1997, pp. 45-67; Morris, 1988, p. 83; Sanger, 2010). With these points in mind, I suggest that the potential for these interspecies, pro-social connections are archetypical and pan-cultural, and they were present at the time the Pazyryk tattoos were inked. While certainly both humans and horses have changed since then, it is likely that similar social traits which enable both humans and horses to engage as teachers and learners in the pro-social ways I have described were present some 2,500 years ago as well. If this is the case, how might these notions of horses as teachers and the co-created culture of riding have factored into interspecies social realities—and have been materialized—in Pazyryk society?

The Pazyryk Horse Tattoos

The Iron Age burials of the Pazyryk archaeological culture (c. 5th through 3rd centuries BCE) are situated in the remote Altai Mountains where present-day Southern Siberia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and China touch. The pastoral economy of the Pazyryk community consisted of hunting, gathering, fishing, and livestock herding, and we can assume horses were used to help accomplish all of these activities. The Pazyryk people lived with and on their horses, who were crucial to every aspect of their lives and livelihoods. The perceived value of horses carried over into death, and they appear in spectacular ways in Pazyryk funerary materials. Within most human burial mounds, entire horses were sacrificed and buried with the Pazyryk men and women. These horses were interred with their saddles, bridles, and/or bits, and in some burials they also wore intricately detailed costumes with artfully crafted adornments (Argent, 2010). Some horses also wore elaborate headdresses adorned with horns of ibex (*Capra siberica siberica*), an indigenous, large mountain goat (Fig. 1).

In many of the burials organic material, including the bodies and clothing of humans and horses, were preserved when subsequent looting allowed water into the graves and it froze into permafrost. Furthermore, in some instances the bodies of the deceased humans also had been preserved by embalming; the organs and flesh had been removed, but the bones and skin remained. Tattoos are visible on many of these preserved bodies, male and female. The tattoos feature animals, including birds, argali, fish, deer, and felines, as well as plant motifs (Fig. 2). Many of the animal motifs appear only once, like the fish on the leg of the man in Figure 2A, and others appear multiple times but with no
discernible regularities. For one particular animal, however, there appears to be a specific pattern to the images and their placement. Space does not permit a full analysis of all the various tattooed animal images, but I will focus attention upon this patterning of tattooed forms I argue represent horse bodies; those circled in Figure 2.

There are three identifiable types of horse bodies—all twisted in the “Scythian Animal Style” S-shaped reverse spiral, a typical motif in Iron Age Inner Asia. The horses all are similarly drawn, all are in profile, with hindquarters facing upwards, and all are placed in similar positions on the various bodies. Moving up the arms, the first type of horse is on the lower arms of various mummies are conveyed naturally and unadorned and are rather roughly executed (Fig. 3, top left). The second type of horse is on the middle arms. These

![Figure 1. Reconstruction of the Berel 11 burial mound (after Samashev et al., 2000, p. 13).](image)
horses are larger and have more detail to them, particularly on the forequarters (Fig. 3, top right). The third type of horse is tattooed on the shoulders (Fig. 3, bottom). They are the largest, with the back of the horse wrapping from the back of the shoulder, the horses’ heads on the human necks, and with one front leg extended and one back (the same as the more flatly represented horses) on the front part of the chest. Although the heads that wrap around the shoulders were difficult to reconstruct due to wrinkling and defects of the skin, other similarities show that they are larger, more elaborate versions of the mid-arm tattoos.

The second and third sets of tattoos have been described as depicting deer or ungulates (Bogucki, 1996, p. 150; Polosmak, 1998, p. 153, 2000, p. 95; Rudenko, 1953/1970, pp. 110-112), reindeer (Vitebsky, 2005, p. 9), and
Figure 3. Top left (lower arm tattoos): top—Pazyryk 2 male, lower forearm (after Rice, 1957, Fig. 58); middle—Pazyryk 5 male, lower forearm (Barkova & Pankova, 2005, Fig. 6); bottom—Pazyryk 5 male, hand (Barkova & Pankova, 2005, Fig. 5). Top right (mid-arm tattoos): top left—Pazyryk 2 male, right bicep (Rudenko, 1953/1970, p. 130); top right—Pazyryk 2 male, left bicep (Rudenko, 1953/1970, p. 131); middle—Ak-Alakha 3-1 female, upper left arm (Polosmak, 1998, Fig. 14); bottom—Pazyryk 2 male, upper right forearm (Rudenko, 1953/1970, p. 133). Bottom (shoulder tattoos): top—Pazyryk 2 male, right shoulder (Rudenko, 1953/1970, Fig. 132); bottom left—Pazyryk 2 female, left shoulder, either less expertly applied or degraded (Barkova & Pankova, 1995, Fig. 23); bottom right—Verh-Kaldzhin 2-1 male, right shoulder (enlargement of Polosmak, 2000, Fig. 1).
"fantastic monster[s]... deer with the beak of an eagle and the tail of a cat" (Rudenko, 1953/1970, p. 263). On closer inspection these can be seen as horse bodies. The hooves are too large and the bone too thick for these to be deer or reindeer. The hooves with fetlocks above, the bends and reflected movement of the legs, the differences in muscling, and the entire shape and proportions echo horses not deer and certainly not reindeer. Furthermore, the manner in which the forelegs are raised and bent, one higher than the other, and the hind legs are separated portray, in all but the twisted aspect, a horse in the middle of the particular motion of rearing playfully (Fig. 4). This is the only time horses’ legs are so placed.

I suggest that the second and third sets of tattoos depict not invented beings but actual, masked horses, adorned with headdresses with representations of ibex horns, as found in Pazyryk burials (Fig. 1) and on rock art dated to the Bronze Age (Francfort, 1998, Fig. 17.11) where a man appears to hit the horse on the head. Francfort (1998) states regarding these Inner Asian horned horses—both actual, in the burials, and as portrayed in the petroglyph—that “a shamanistic substratum in the broad sense gives... the best possible explanation of this theme: the image of a magic mount for a journey to the other world” (p. 315). According to this view the actual Pazyryk horses decorated with horn headdresses and buried with the deceased humans were sacrificed.
for the purpose of carrying the souls of the human dead to the otherworld. I suggest that these horses are represented in the tattoos.

To explain why the horses’ bodies were twisted 180 degrees, we might also fruitfully look to elements of the Inner Asian shamanistic worldview, a highly conservative collection of beliefs which have been argued to date back to the Paleolithic (Basilov, 1989), Mesolithic (Zvelebil, 2003), or Neolithic (Martynov, 1991). This worldview concerns an animistic universe with upper, middle, and lower worlds; reciprocity between the human, environmental, spirit, and animal worlds; and particular symbolism in material culture. Within this belief system, animals are tied to the unseen world in that they may undergo transformations themselves, and it is only through animals that humans may move between the three levels of the seen and unseen worlds (Baldick, 2000, p. 89). Within this context, the otherworld is the reverse of this one; there things are inverted, upside down, backwards (Eliade, 1951/1964, pp. 190-204). Here, the spiral:

...bears the imprint of the cosmological paradigm, the transcendental cavity tunneling to the axis mundi, which joins the antipodal centers of this World and the Other. It demarcated an existential place or point, wherein the arcana of creation and entropy are but reflected images of each other—both, at once, self-generating and self-destructive. (Ripinski-Naxon, 1993, p. 33)

Thus, the reverse spiral might represent life and death, simultaneously. According to Jacobson (2007), within Animal Style art “a twisted animal referred inevitably to either the act of predation or to the impact of predation... and probable death” (p. 65). But there is more to these tattoos than their twisted aspect. In addition, generally the upper arm and shoulder horse tattoos are more detailed on the front parts of their bodies, which face down toward the earth. Their hindquarters drift upward as if floating, outlined but undefined, not filled in. The black/down, white/up rendering of the horse tattoos is also consistent with the Inner Asian shamanistic tenet that black is associated with lower world and white with the upper world (Basilov, 1990, p. 37). With this detailing in mind, I suggest that the twisted horse tattoos represent neither predation nor “probable” death but the actual act of dying, the moment at which the soul or life force leaves the body. There seems to be a notion conveyed in the tattoos that at death the substance of life, the detail, leaves the body; the ephemeral spirit is freed of its weight and glides amorphously upward to the upper world. In this way—twisted, at the point of death—the horse is memorialized, yet the power of his ascending spirit remains as well. Depicted in the tattoos at the moment of death, life and death, the earthly and the otherworldly, appear in the same image. The horse is dead, but he is
also always alive—and memorialized playfully, happily so—his memory and power always with the person and visible to the community.

Life, Death, and the Marking of Time

Parker Pearson (1999, p. 64) discusses the importance of skin as a boundary in the Pazyryk burials, where both its surface and its covering hold symbolic importance. The skin and bones were preserved by the Pazyryks through embalming; the flesh and brains were discarded. The skin represents the interface between the self and the world, and tattoos upon it serve to bring into consciousness images and ideas that are culturally or personally important. Through time, tattoos have been applied for purely decorative purposes, to celebrate a significant event or life achievement, to mark rites of passage, to memorialize loved ones who have died, and to mark various types of ethnic, religious, or ideological group membership (Cains & Byard, 2008, pp. 197, 206-210). Parker Pearson (1999, p. 65) argues that the Pazyryk tattoos were meant to be protective, while Polosmak (1998, p. 153) supposes that both the Pazyryk tattooing and the iconography itself were of broader significance to the community as a whole (rather than the tattoos solely relating to personal attributes or meanings). Clearly the regularities I have pointed out within this small set would support their communal significance. But this does not rule out personal, relational meanings of the horses on the tattoos.

For the people of the Altai Mountains today a person’s time is measured by his horses (A. Halemba, personal communication, October 15, 2005). A man will have several horses over his lifetime, a gentle one as a young boy, then one (or more) he trains himself. Halemba notes that this latter horse is sometimes called the “highest treasure.” When a person’s horse dies, it is a noted time, a time of transition to another phase of life. With this in mind, I suggest the Pazyryk horse tattoos represent actual, biographical horses, horses who belonged with the tattooed person, the horses of that person’s lifetime. If this is so, then it is possible to imagine that they were applied over time, beginning with the hands and moving upward to the shoulders, with the regularities of pattern and placement representing rites of passage associated with the person’s own horses. The less defined and unadorned horses on the lower arms may have been representative of that first horse, the older, steady schoolmaster who taught the youngster to ride, now gone; their rough execution correlative with the lack of finesse of a learning rider.

The masked horses of the middle arms, more elaborate and artfully applied, could be those who shared and reflected more refined riding ability and human-horse accomplishments and identities (Argent, 2010). The largest,
“highest” horse, on the shoulders, might be the “highest treasure,” the horse trained by the now-expert rider. It is significant that this horse is applied so that the actual human and tattooed horse heads touch, perhaps depicting the special bond that can occur when horse and human have chosen to belong to each other.

If this was the case then as the horses themselves marked significant events in the humans’ lives, the horses’ own deaths would be inscribed upon their humans’ bodies. Painfully etched upon the most important part of the body for these people of Pazyryk—the part worth preserving through embalming for the life in the otherworld—were the histories of the horses of their lifetimes, both commemorated and marking time.

Beyond these potential individual meanings, that the horses are all portrayed in the particular position of rearing playfully might convey a sense of both the Pazyryk community’s treatment of horses and their cosmological beliefs. Dominated, abused horses do not amuse themselves in this way, suggesting that the models for these tattoos were valued and well-treated, and that these human-horse relationships were pleasant and caring. These happy horses seem to leave willingly on their journey to the unseen otherworld, perhaps serving to remind their people that it might not be such a bad place to go when their time in the seen world is over. Furthermore, literally curved back on themselves, the horses seem to represent a nonlinear sense of time folding back on itself, the expression of a future for humans and horses alike that extends beyond the death of the body. Within this template of time, the belief in a reconstructed life for humans and their horses within an afterlife might have served, as it does for many today, as an anodyne to the fear of death and the loss of loved ones.

In these ways, Pazyryk personal, social, and cosmological meanings appear to coalesce in these horse tattoos, materialized as powerful, interspecies “narratives of belonging” (Casella & Fowler, 2004, p. 3), entangling human and horse bodies and identities into one. The horses are no longer of flesh and blood and hair but of soot implanted into human skin. Yet the importance of the actual horses seems to not be reduced by these archetypical images, but instead it is heightened. Although each image is still one horse, and remembered as one horse, each is more. Each also becomes “horses,” both creative of and embedded within communal corporeal, cognitive, and spiritual experiences and beliefs, multiplied in significance.

When approached with a broadened understanding of how human-horse culture can be perpetuated intersubjectively and pro-socially, what emerges from this assessment of the Pazyryk tattoos is an historically particular and unique culture with beliefs about the nature and abilities of horses that belie assumptions that their value consisted of mere economic and symbolic import,
points that would be missed in a narrow, conventional archaeological analysis. Within the Pazyryk community, smaller-scale, embodied, emotional interspecies interactions fed into larger social structures and cosmological meanings. The space the Pazyryk people shared with their horses was liminal—in the relational borderlands of hybrid bodies and wills (see also Birke et al., 2004; Thompson, 2011). The boundaries between human and animal, the living and the dead, this world and the next, and the past, present, and future were blurred, permeable, and in every sense included horses—not as objects or sets but as individual, relational beings.

It is clear that objectifying, functionalist schemes of human-animal co-being focused solely upon economics and exploitation limit our view and can no longer be assumed a priori. As convincingly put by Clark (2007), when concepts of “‘giving,’ ‘generosity,’ ‘hospitality,’ ‘care,’ ‘affection’ [and] ‘love’” regain validity in contemporary thought, we can begin to “acknowledge that relations of giving and taking, caring and being cared for . . . are always already at play in the more official economies we partake in” (p. 51). The pro-social equine deeds described here simply cannot be accommodated within conventional archaeological paradigms which focus solely upon control and manipulation. I have instead moved the discussion from politics to pedagogy, where culture is shared and co-created, looped through time between thoughtful, caring subjects of two species, in the past as in the present. Exploring smaller-scale, intersubjective human-animal relationships and their effects on shared interspecies worlds seems one fruitful way for archaeology to begin to move toward accepting animals as beings who can significantly impact human societies in ways not previously considered.

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Notes

1. Schooling to the level of “plain usefulness” (Wynmalen, 1952, p. 20) takes about a year of regular work. As the potential danger or precision of the action increases, so does the time needed for schooling. Dressage “airs above the ground,” for instance, are attempted only after a minimum of six to eight years of constant, daily work.
2. It is possible for a human to teach herself to ride, particularly with an older, patient schoolmaster. It is not, however, advisable with a young horse because neither typically possess the confidence, sense of balance, and learned language through which to share meanings while remaining safe. Another adage used to describe this pairing is “green on green equals black and blue” (where green refers to inexperienced).

3. In interesting support of this thesis, when I presented a version of this paper at an academic conference, one of the session panelists showed upon her shoulder a tattoo commemorating her first horse, now gone.

References


